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Bardaisan of Edessa

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INTRODUCTION

THE RESEARCH AND ITS PROBLEMS

In 1855 W. Cureton published his *Spicilegium Syriacum* from the Syriac Ms. BM add. 14,658 of the sixth or seventh century, containing the "Book of the Laws of Countries". The latter seemed to him to be the lost Syriac original of Bardaisan of Edessa's famous treatise on Fate. Since then, scholarly attention has again been directed upon this intriguing figure.¹ So far, the shock of often diametrically opposed opinions has not resulted in a generally accepted view of the life and teaching of Bardaisan. Thus G. Widengren could remark that a modern monograph on Bardaisan was lacking, which did not prevent him from making a critical examination of H. H. Schaeder's essay on Bardaisan, and styling it a makeshift for the desired monograph.² A year later this lack was not yet supplied, and O. Klíma calls Bardaisan "eine ziemlich ängstliche Persönlichkeit", whose full teaching is unfortunately not yet exactly known.³

In these circumstances both the motive for and the justification of the present investigation will be clear enough; however, all the riddles

¹ W. Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum*, London 1855. Syriac text: pp. ٨-٩; translation: pp. 1-34; the work is subsequently indicated by the abbreviation *BLC*. Bardaisan probably lived 154-222 A.D. and passed the greater part of his life in Edessa. Eusebius *H.E.* IV, 30 mentions his *διάλογος περὶ εἰμαρμένης*. The earlier literature concerning him is disregarded here; see for that: Cureton, *o.c.*, p. V, n. 1. In the present work the name is given as Bardaisan, a transcription of the Syriac form ܒܪܕܝܣܢܐ; the Greek form Bardesanes is common.

For preliminary orientation see *RGG*³, Bd. I, *s.v.* Bardesanes, *kol.* 870f. and *RAC*, Bd I, *s.v.* Bardesanes, *kol.* 1180-1186 (L. Cerfaux).

² G. Widengren, *Mani und der Manichäismus*, Stuttgart 1961, S. 147. H. H. Schaeder's essay, which may be regarded as an incomplete monograph, appeared in 1932: H. H. Schaeder, 'Bardesanes von Edessa in der Überlieferung der griechischen und syrischen Kirche', *ZKG*, Bd. LI, 1932, SS. 21-74.

³ O. Klíma, *Manis Zeit und Leben*, Monographien des Orientinstituts der Tschechoslowakischen Akademie der Wissensch., Bd. 18, Prag 1962, S. 135.

of Bardaisan's personality will certainly not be solved, if indeed this be possible, while some parts of his teaching will still, we fear, remain unknown. What can be carried out, is a survey of the history of research regarding Bardaisan until the present time, and a new examination of all the available sources, with the addition of those which had escaped attention or have never been confronted with the others. After this, a fresh attempt may be made to portray the life and teaching of Bardaisan and to determine his place in the religious and cultural life of Edessa in the second half of the second century of our era. All the cultures and religions which have exercised their influence in that town will require discussion in this comparative review, for Edessa was one of the points of contact between East and West, and for centuries was a centre of cultural exchange and mutual influence.¹ In the historical account all the points of controversy concerning the life and doctrine of Bardaisan will emerge, examination and comparison of the sources will supply new data or permit of new combinations, whereupon we may attempt a sketch of Bardaisan's life and teaching in the setting of his time.² The history of the group that took his name will also need some attention, the more so as it has become evident that there were differences within this group during the centuries of its existence, while all claimed to be Bardaisan's spiritual heirs.

Research regarding Bardaisan may be divided into three periods. Each of these is distinguished from the others either by a specific approach to the problem or by the scholars who dominated each period. The first period exemplifies this with its almost bewildering number of publications.

The first period: 1855-1897

In the Preface of his *Spicilegium Syriacum* Cureton devoted some space to Bardaisan, of whom some authors report that he wrote a dialogue on Fate, dedicated to Antoninus. The latter Cureton held to be the emperor Marcus Aurelius.³ Parts of this dialogue were known from the

¹ Cf. G. Widengren, *Iranisch-semitische Kulturbegegnung in parthischer Zeit*, Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, Geisteswissenschaft. Heft 70, Köln-Opladen 1960. *RAC*, Bd. IV, s.v. Edessa.

² For this method cf. J. Rudhardt, 'Sur la possibilité de comprendre une religion antique', *Numen*, Vol. XI, 1964, pp. 189-211.

³ Cureton, *o.c.*, p. ii.